



UNITED STATES SENATE  
**REPUBLICAN  
POLICY COMMITTEE**

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## **The Declaration and Its Heroic Signers**

### **They Pledged Their Lives, Their Fortunes, and Their Sacred Honor**

In the summer of 1776, the Second Continental Congress was sitting in the State House in Philadelphia. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia laid down his illustrious and radical resolution, “*Resolved*, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States. . . .” At the time, the war was already a year old; the “shot heard round the world” had been fired at Lexington in April of the preceding year. The Colonials had been waging war, but it was not a war for independence. They had been fighting for their rights as Englishmen.

Lee’s resolution was *not* met with unanimous enthusiasm, and the question was postponed until July 1. During that interim, a committee would be appointed to draw up a formal declaration of Congress’s intentions and rationale. Jefferson of Virginia, Adams of Massachusetts, Franklin of Pennsylvania, Sherman of Connecticut, and Livingston of New York were appointed to the committee, but the initial work fell to Jefferson because he had a “peculiar felicity” for written expression.

On July 1, Congress returned to Lee’s resolution, and the following day they agreed to sever America’s ties with the British Crown. The vote was unanimous among the States voting. Two Pennsylvania delegates had stayed away so that Pennsylvania’s new majority could vote for independence. Caesar Rodney of Delaware rode 80 miles by day and night through a thunderstorm to break a tie in the Delaware delegation.

Congress then turned to the mode of declaring its independence, and the draft that Jefferson (and then the committee) had worked on was laid before the house. The Continental Congress removed Jefferson’s impassioned indictment of the slave trade and made numerous other changes. Jefferson favored some of the changes but opposed others.

That part of the Declaration which has become most famous, the second paragraph, was notably improved by the editing which Congress gave it – and that paragraph now may be immortal. It contains perhaps the most quoted and most beloved sentences in Western political writing. It still stirs the hearts of freedom-loving peoples around the globe. That paragraph begins with these potent words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. . . .”

The Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, but only the President of Congress, John Hancock of Massachusetts, and the secretary signed it on that day. Most delegates didn’t sign until a month later. Eventually, 56 patriots signed. Legend has it that John Hancock’s signature was made bold enough for the king to read without his glasses.

On that day in early August when most of the signatures were added to that “traitorous” document, General George Washington had 10,000 men under his command. Off the coast of New York and New Jersey, more than 130 British ships sat at anchor. The Signers had already received word that those ships contained 42,000 sailors and soldiers who were awaiting an order to join the British forces already ashore. The Colonies were at war with the mightiest military force on earth. Every man who put his pen to the Declaration knew that he faced the wrath of the king – and that traitors were hanged.

The magnificent second paragraph of the Declaration may live forever, but the last sentence is frequently neglected. As the Signers bent over the parchment to scratch their names, these are the words that fell under their gaze:

“And for the support of  
this Declaration, with a  
firm Reliance on the  
Protection of divine  
Providence, we  
mutually pledge to each  
other our Lives, our  
Fortunes, and our  
sacred Honor.” With  
that solemn pledge,  
what did the Signers  
put at risk?

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The following account is from T.R. Fehrenbach’s book, *GREATNESS TO SPARE: THE HEROIC SACRIFICES OF THE MEN WHO SIGNED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1968). Similar accounts may be found in other sources, and the radio commentator Paul Harvey broadcasts a similar account of the Signers’ sacrifices.

**Literally, the Signers risked their lives, and they were young men.** Three were in their twenties, and 18 were in their thirties. Only Franklin was an old man. Unless hanged or shot, most Signers could expect to live many more years.

**Literally, the Signers risked their fortunes, and many of the Signers were men of property.** Eleven Signers were prosperous merchants and one owned the largest mercantile house in America. Nine were large landowners. Some were of modest means, but many had substantial assets.

**Literally, the Signers risked their honor.** Treason is not an honorable calling. Additionally, the Signers risked the honor and safety of their families. All but two had wives and children at home, including infant children. Almost all of these families were exposed to British action at some time during the war and, as the Signers knew, American women were not spared the horrors that can be visited upon women by foreign troops.

Twenty-four of the Signers were lawyers or jurists. Others were doctors of medicine, career politicians, merchants, and a minister. They knew that if the Americans lost this struggle they would never again practice their professions.

**What Price Was Paid?** And, when the war had ended and their pledge had been redeemed, what price had the Signers paid?

**They pledged their lives, and nine Signers died of wounds or hardships during the war.** Another five were captured or imprisoned, and some of them were treated brutally.

The wives and children of others were killed, jailed, mistreated, persecuted, or left penniless. The British drove one Signer from his wife's deathbed, and he lost all of his children.

Two of Abraham Clark's sons (Clark was from New Jersey) were captured by the British and imprisoned in a floating hell hole. So many American prisoners died on that ship and in the warehouses of New York City that the shores of Long Island Sound were reported to be "white with human bones" of the dead who had been pitched into the river. Because their father was a Signer, the Clark boys were selected for especially brutal treatment. One of them, Captain Thomas Clark, was put in solitary confinement and starved. He managed to stay alive only because other prisoners pushed bread to him through his key hole.

The British told Abraham Clark of his boys' fate, and they offered to release the boys if Clark deserted the cause of liberty. He refused. Further, he did not bring the matter to the attention of the Congress where he sat, and he asked for no special consideration from the military.

When news of Captain Clark's treatment eventually reached Congress, they ordered General Washington to throw a British officer into a hole and starve him to death. Washington conveyed that

order to General Sir William Howe, and Howe ordered that the persecution of the Clark brothers promptly cease. Thereafter both sides treated their prisoners more humanely.

Abraham Clark refused to revoke his solemn pledge in order to save his own sons. Abraham Clark is not today a famous man, but his contemporaries chiseled this epitaph on his gravestone: *He loved his Country / And Adhered to her Cause / In the Darkest Hours of her Struggles / Against Oppression.*

**The Signers pledged their fortunes, and the houses of twelve Signers were burned to the ground.** At Yorktown, American artillery men purposely spared Thomas Nelson's house until he gave a direct order that the house be fired upon. The first round sent a ball completely through the house, killing British officers. Eventually, the house was destroyed by cannon fire.

**Seventeen Signers lost everything they owned.**

**They pledged their sacred honor,** and every Signer was condemned as a traitor and hunted. Most were driven into flight and often barred from their families or homes. They were offered immunity, freedom, rewards, their property, or their lives and the release of their loved ones if they would break their pledge or take the King's protection. **But, not one Signer defected or changed his stand, even in the darkest hours of the war.**

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The Glorious Fourth is a day to reflect upon the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the United States of America. The Declaration's second paragraph will justly be remarked upon at thousands of sites, but let us never forget the noble pledge in its last sentence: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

It was that honored pledge that brought the Declaration itself and the American Nation through the blood and sorrow and destruction of the War for Independence.

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Background on the Declaration may be found in Dumas Malone, *THE STORY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1954), and elsewhere. Information in the paper from the Fehrenbach book is taken particularly from pages 9-10, 84 & 88 [Clark], 232 [Nelson], and 247. Additional (and, in some cases, different) information on the Signers can be found in David C. Whitney, *FOUNDERS OF FREEDOM IN AMERICA: LIVES OF THE MEN WHO SIGNED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1964); Lynn Montross, *THE RELUCTANT REBELS* (1950); and Michael Novak, *ON TWO WINGS: HUMBLE FAITH AND COMMON SENSE AT THE AMERICAN FOUNDING*, Appendix, part 12 (2002).

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